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AN EXPERIMENT IN PUPIL SELF-GOVERNMENT

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The editorial on "Student Self-Government" in the May, 1921, number of the *School Review* prompts me to write of a certain phase of this problem which we tried out in the Bowen High School. When I came to this high school in October, 1918, I found teachers in charge of all study-rooms. It was not a supervised study period in the sense that this term is used today; the teachers simply kept order and checked attendance. It seemed to me at the time, and seems so still, that that task is a good illustration of zero in occupations for a teacher. I felt that a large majority of high-school pupils might be trained to study unpoliced.

Accordingly, in September, 1920, we opened what we called a Senior study-room in a part of the library. It was to be unsupervised. The students were to study there on their own responsibility. I talked with them in detail of my plans and ideals and of what it would do for them in the way of training, responsibility, and self-control. I set the standard high, perhaps too high—silence, no talking—just what one finds in the library reading-room of the university or the public library downtown.

I did not make the mistake of starting the thing and then withdrawing my interest. I dropped in from time to time, not every day and not with any regularity. I tried to go into the room during each study period once or twice a week. I usually found a small group of two or three, sometimes more, talking; by far the greater number, however, intently studying. On a few occasions I found some boy rather boisterous. I removed such and put them into the supervised study-hall. I never found more than two or three of this type in a semester. I remember that two of these pupils whom I removed asked permission to return, stating that I would never find them disobeying the rules again. I allowed them to go back, and so far as I know they kept their word. The

students seemed to consider it a privilege and honor to be allowed to study in this manner.

I impressed upon them the fact that I held them responsible as a group for the conduct of their study hour, that I did not expect any single individual to come to me and complain about the delinquencies of any other individual, but that, as a group, if they felt that any one of their number was not playing fair, and if, after talking with him to no effect, they wished to bring the matter to me, as a committee, I would take up the matter and remove the offender. This procedure was never followed, and no offending pupil was ever reported to me by either an individual or a group.

On two different occasions pupils came to me and asked to be transferred to another study-room, stating that they could not study in this room on account of the noise. Two pupils in three and one-half semesters made this request. I found that the very best pupils, meaning those whose social attitude is right at all times, would suffer any interruption and annoyance in their study period and not take any steps toward reprimanding or removing the disturbers.

On the whole, I think I found the plan growing slowly in the right direction; yet I discontinued it in the middle of this semester, the fourth of the trial. Why? (1) I felt that the progress toward the ideal set was too slow; that is, the pupils, this semester, did very little better than those of the first semester. About three times in five when I dropped in I found a few people talking. (2) The pupils were not willing to assume the responsibility that goes with privilege. (3) I had a vague feeling that perhaps, as the editorial referred to stated, "Principals have not always recognized that high-school students cannot assume responsibility for their own conduct except after a long course of carefully controlled practice."

One of the fourth-year English teachers asked a class to write on the "Failure of the Senior Study." Perhaps a few of their comments would be interesting and enlightening. Some of the more pointed follow.

The plan of giving the Seniors a study in which the student must rely on his own sense of duty is an experiment in Bowen. I think that it should be

abolished for the three following reasons: it places too much responsibility on the individual; it is a form of nuisance to the principal; it is a beginning for other forms of freedom that the pupils are liable to take advantage of.

There are some students who will not, or cannot, study unless forced to do so. When left on their honor, they refuse to study and instead hold conversation with others.

Senior study-hall has failed because the students do not realize the importance of such a privilege, and because they have not been accustomed to such freedom.

Pupils are inclined to sit near their friends, thus increasing the temptation to talk and waste time. They have not yet learned to employ themselves profitably when under no restraint.

Before this plan can be successful the Seniors must observe three things: they should have consideration for others; they should practice self-control; and they should always come to study prepared to work.

Enough evidence has been given to show that the pupils themselves consider the experiment a failure. As these papers were written before I made the final decision to discontinue the plan, the attitude of the pupils ought probably to be given as the fourth and perhaps the best reason for the step which I took.

Why did the plan fail? Doesn't it seem that pupils who, for the most part, have been eleven years in the public school should have secured the self-control and ability to take the attitude toward questions of fair play and honesty that would enable them to carry out successfully a plan of importance to their school as a social unit? Their success here would have been a stimulus all along the line in the way of good citizenship. I think the following reasons account for the failure of the plan:

1. The soil was not properly prepared, either with the pupils or with the faculty. The latter were not hostile, but neither were they openly enthusiastic; success would demand that. The former were not led to see themselves working out this scheme as the culmination of an ideal.

2. Pupils in the elementary schools as a rule are given no opportunity to carry on the affairs of their own room. They are directed by the teacher all the time. Most principals are reluctant to leave

a room alone for five minutes if it can be avoided. Consequently, nowhere along the line are pupils called upon to exercise any degree of self-management and initiative. There may be some rare exceptions to this rule.

Self-control is the basis of all achievement. The supreme business of the school should be the giving of right social attitudes, the development of a sense of justice, power of initiative, and independence of character, and the ability to co-operate toward the common good. Instead of this, we make, for the most part, the mastering of the content of books the chief end and aim.

I am not submitting this experiment with the idea that I have discovered something new. I have no doubt that more than one experienced high-school principal will say, "We've tried all that out long ago and could have told you that it would not work." Probably true. It has been my experience in life, however, that there are always some who succeed where others fail. It seems to me that the idea is right and the plan worth trying over and over again. I expect to, at any rate, and, under somewhat different conditions, hope for success.